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ABSTRACT

This report examines recent research and program developments designed to improve the education of children by improving the literacy skills of their parents, particularly their mothers, who did not graduate from high school. Traditional research has revealed that more highly educated mothers have greater success in providing their children with the cognitive language skills that contribute to early success in school than less well-educated mothers. A growing body of recent research, however, suggests that the way parents raise their children may be more important than the parents' occupation, income, or educational level. During the past decade there has been growing interest in the notion that educationally disadvantaged parents and children are a learning unit, and that family and intergenerational literacy programs can provide parents with needed support in their role as first teachers. Programs which seek to improve parents' literacy and other skills include Even Start, the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Model, and the Intergenerational Literacy Action Research Project. Two major implications from the research on the influence of parental literacy are: (1) low-literate parents, particularly mothers, are more likely to exert a positive influence on their children's academic achievement when they are able to enhance their own literacy skills than when they are unable to do so; and (2) intervention programs should be designed to enable family members to construct useful meanings and definitions of literacy. Contains a list of 18 selected readings. (MDM)

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Parents' Literacy and Their Children's Success in School:

Recent Research, Promising Practices, and Research Implications

Why children succeed or fail in school is one of the most enduring questions for educational researchers. A salient finding from traditional research on both adult education and early childhood intervention programs is that the mother's level of education is one of the most important factors influencing children's reading levels and other school achievements.

Generally, traditional research has revealed that more highly educated mothers have greater success in providing their children with the cognitive and language skills that contribute to early success in school (Sticht & McDonald, 1990). Also, children of mothers with high levels of education stay in school longer than children of mothers with low levels of education.

It is important for the reader to keep in mind that traditional studies focus on broad populations instead of the populations most likely to experience difficulties in acquiring basic literacy skills. There is evidence suggesting that correlational studies intended to provide information for literacy intervention have identified symptoms of the causal variables. The social and cultural precepts within the family are causal factors which must be addressed in programs designed to produce long-term changes in the lives of disadvantaged family members (Hayes, 1991; Gadsden, in press).

This report examines recent research and program developments designed to improve the education of children by improving the literacy skills of their parents (particularly their mothers) who did not graduate from high school.

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Recent Research

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data provide some evidence supporting the traditional interpretations of children's academic success that focus on gross measures of parents' educational attainment. A review of the performance of children and young adults across age groups (9 to 25 years of age) and across ethnic groups on various literacy tasks of the NAEP confirmed the importance of mothers' educational levels (Sticht, 1988). Data from the 1990 NAEP reading assessments revealed that the average proficiency among fourth-graders was lower for those students who report that their mothers had not completed high school.

However, another line of research has challenged the traditionalist view that one or a few variables can explain the influence of the home on low-income children's academic success. A growing body of research suggests that how parents raise their children may be more important than the parents' occupation, income, or educational level (Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991).

The Harvard Families and Literacy Study (Chall & Snow, 1982) investigated the home literacy practices of successful and unsuccessful low-income elementary school students to identify factors that contributed to the acquisition of literacy and children's achievement in school. The study found "no simple correlation between parents' literacy level, educational background, amount of time spent on literacy work with children, and overall achievement."

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Auerbach's review of the ethnographic studies of family literacy found that a two-way support system (as opposed to simply parent-to-child literacy learning) characterized the literacy interactions of many low-income, minority and immigrant families.

One study of parental involvement based on a model of children reading to parents found that children who read to their parents on a regular basis made greater gains than children receiving an equivalent amount of extra reading instruction by reading specialists at school (Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982).

Auerbach's work also shows that "indirect factors including frequency of children's outings with adults, number of maternal outings, emotional climate of the home, amount of time spent interacting with adults, level of financial stress, enrichment activities, and parental involvement with the schools had a stronger effect on many aspects of reading and writing than did direct literacy activities, such as help with homework" (Auerbach, 1989).

Research Issues

A firm understanding of the family context will increase our understanding of the "strengths" of educationally disadvantaged families that contribute to the children's academic success.

Teale (1986) argues that a frequent shortcoming of research on the effects of family background is its correlational design. "Children are tested in, for example, various aspects of literacy development (usually referred to as reading readiness) and their achievement levels are then correlated with particular home background characteristics. Such research provides no direct evidence for cause–effect relations. Yet, frequently, these studies suggest implications for instruction or home intervention programs."

A growing number of researchers argue that naturalistic inquiry in which the researcher does not attempt to manipulate study setting and places no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be (Patton, 1990) is particularly well-suited for gathering data on all of the contributors to literacy development.

One researcher has suggested a cycle of research that begins with an ethnographic examination of the context as a whole, is followed by case studies to focus carefully on a few individuals, continues with experimental research of new approaches, and ends with another ethnographic examination to see how the new procedures work in an entire context (Kamil,1989).

During the last decade, educators and policymakers have become increasingly interested in the notion that educationally disadvantaged parents and children are a learning unit and that family and intergenerational literacy programs are a promising approach to supporting parents in their role as first teachers.

Promising Programs and Practices

Improving the school readiness and literacy skills of children is an essential goal of the federally funded Even Start family literacy program. Preliminary findings of the 4-year national evaluation of the Even Start program reveal that participating children who have had no prior pre-school experience double the expected developmental growth rate. This finding suggests that "as Even Start children enter the public schools they are more likely to know basic concepts and precursors of kindergarten skills than they would have in the absence of the program" (St. Pierre, Swartz, Murray, & Deck, 1993).

In the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Model, parents work on basic academic skills and parenting skills while their children attend a preschool class. Follow-up studies of preschool participants who were at risk of failure when they enrolled in the family literacy program showed that primary grade students performed above average on variables such as academic performance, motivation to learn, attendance, self confidence, and probable success in school. Ninety percent of the children were rated as "not considered at risk for school failure" by their current teachers.

There were also significant findings for the parents who participated in the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Model. Over 80 percent of the parents who enrolled in the program were unemployed, had not completed high school, and had an income of less than $7,000 per year, primarily from public assistance (Seaman, Popp & Darling, 1991; National Center For Family Literacy, 1993). After participating in the program—

- 41 percent either were in some form of higher or continuing education program or had definite plans for enrolling;
- 35 percent were employed;

- 41 percent were not receiving any form of public assistance; and
- Well over half of the parents were still serving as volunteers in their children's elementary schools 1 to 3 years after leaving the program.

The Intergenerational Literacy Action Research Project (ILAR), conducted by Wider Opportunities for Women (Fossen and Sticht, 1991), involved mothers participating in community-based programs that provide women with basic-skills instruction and job training. The study revealed that 65 percent of the children benefitted from their mother's participation in the adult education and training programs.

Following their participation in the project, more than 90 percent of the mothers reported that they had become aware of the influence they had on their children's educational achievements. The mothers also stated that they would read to their children more often and make greater efforts to help them with their homework, take them to the library, and talk with them about school.

Conclusion and Research Implications

There are a number of factors in the family context that must be identified and thoroughly investigated so that low-literate parents learn how to use their existing skills as tools for improving their lives and their children's education.

Two major implications from this research are:

- Low-literate parents, particularly mothers, are more likely to exert a positive influence on their children's academic achievement when they are able to enhance their own literacy skills.
- Intervention programs should be designed to enable family members to construct useful meanings and definitions of literacy.

All the stakeholders should come together to develop a research agenda for examining parent–child interactions and advancing family literacy as a field with appropriate frameworks and instructional approaches.

Selected Readings

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This *Research Report* was written by L. Ann Benjamin and is part of a series published by the office of Research of the U. S. Department of Education. If you have comments or would like to suggest topics for future issues, please write to the Office of Research, OERI, U.S. Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 610, Washington, DC 20208. To be added to the mailing list, send your name and address to *Research Reports* Mailing List, at the same address. This report is a public document and may be reproduced in part or in its entirety without permission. Please credit OERI.

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